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A Natural High

by Helen McCallie

“At age 46, I finally realized that money and prestige meant nothing if I didn’t have mental health and any joy in my work. I now make a third of my previous salary, but I sleep all night and laugh all day. I followed my ‘gut feeling’ and now work at a nature reserve. It’s wonderful! Follow your sense of what is right for you.”

That is what I wrote on the inquiry form I received last summer from the Office of Career Services at Furman. But when asked if I would be willing to elaborate on my comments for *Furman* magazine, I hesitated for two reasons.

First, I thought my decision to leave my career in education administration and look for a “fun” job would seem too easy. Whatever I do affects only me — not a husband or children (I’m single) or mortgage payments (I’ve moved too often to own a house). Second, if I were to tell

the complete story of why I made such a dramatic lifestyle choice, then I would have to include a subject uncomfortable to some readers: depression.

On the other hand, I have this missionary zeal to encourage those who may be thinking about “ditching it all” and starting again to actually do it.

Six years ago, I was the director of development at a fine preparatory school. By objective standards I had an enviable position, if you judge success by the quality of school, job title

and salary. The reality, however, was that I was absolutely miserable. I hated what I was doing. I was physically ill every Sunday night knowing that five workdays followed. I could not see how my work or my life were going to get any better.

After 14 excruciating months, I finally realized that I not only could but that I should quit my job. There had to be more to life than forcing myself to get up every day and act happy, when in reality I was barely functioning. The worst thing that could happen if I resigned would be that I would have to live very carefully off my

savings until I got another job. I could do that.

So I walked into the headmaster's office and announced that I was doing us both a favor and resigning. I added that I wanted a job where I could wear lots of Western silver jewelry, jeans and hiking boots — not exactly appropriate attire for a fund-raiser. As I was saying this, it occurred to me that I might have lost my mind, but it felt *so* good. I have never looked back with an ounce of regret, except to wonder why it took me so long to make such an important and worthwhile change.

How could I have missed all the signals in my 20s and 30s that should have told me not to follow a conventional career path? After all, when was I the happiest? My years in Vienna, Austria (1975-85), where I was an English-speaking clerk with the United Nations and a registrar and counselor at the Institute of European Studies, were fun and interesting — and stress-free. I had lots of energy for enjoying the city and for *living*.

Before and after my Vienna years, I took two non-conventional trips. Both involved five months of rough camping, the first through the Middle East to Nepal and the second from North Africa to the southern tip of the continent. Obviously I relished adventure, but I thought I was just getting this out of my system before I came home and got a “real” job, which is what I always thought I should do.

Two years after graduating from Furman in 1971, I had received my master's degree in educational psychology with the emphasis on college student personnel. It followed that I would work in higher education in the States.

Upon my return my first job was as the assistant to the president at two liberal arts colleges — seven years with the same president. I couldn't be fonder of that president, but I was not always at ease in my job. I had bouts of anxiety every few years, but I thought they just went with the territory of university administration. It didn't occur to me that perhaps I was in the wrong territory.

I groan now when I see how much trouble I could have avoided if I had read the signals. Instead, I did the opposite: I let myself be lured by prestige and salary and accepted a job as director of development at a prep school — that was beginning a capital campaign, no less!

Immediately I went to a weeklong seminar for new development officers from around the country — and began every day in tears and a cold sweat. I even told the seminar leader that I didn't think I really wanted this job, but we didn't pursue the subject. After all, who actually quits a job in the first month and says, “Oh, I think I made a career mistake”?

Did my colleagues at work think something could be wrong? I recall a staff meeting for the division heads in which we were doing a stream-of-consciousness exercise. We were to write down two words that best described how we felt at that moment. My words were “panicked” and “overwhelmed” — or more like “PANICKED” and “OVERWHELMED.” I think I was asking for help, but at the time I didn't know it. And no one ever commented on my words, so I didn't either.

By month four I had a nervous breakdown and took a month's leave of absence. A week after I went public with my illness — and depression *is* an illness — Neil Rudenstine, then president of Harvard, announced that he was taking time off because of exhaustion and depression. I was so glad I'd thought of it first.

I returned to work after my sick leave, failing to realize that although the anti-depressant medication was helping me, my work environment was not allowing me to make a complete recovery. It took ten more months before I had my epiphany. I resigned my job and resigned myself to the realization that I was absolutely in the wrong place for me. Medicine could do only so much. To heal fully, I needed to make critical changes in my life.

I went to St. Louis to stay with family until I could figure out my next act. Through volunteer work with the Sierra Club, I learned about the position I have now as receptionist and secretary for Shaw Nature Reserve of the Missouri Botanical Garden in Gray Summit. I howled with laughter when I heard the hourly wage and immediately said that it was way beneath me. But after a few days of considering the alternative of staying “in my field,” I asked for an interview — and got the job.

Where is the fulfillment in this line of work? It's in helping teachers schedule field trips, mapping out appropriate hikes for anxious, non-outdoorsy mothers with children in tow, and suggesting where to find animal tracks, frogs or snapping turtles. It is in doing my job well, because if I keep the Reserve's calendar accurately, the staff on schedule, the bills paid and the details covered, then I help my colleagues do their jobs, which in turn affects over 60,000 visitors a year.

What do I have? Peace of mind, in that I am really good at what I do and play an important role at the Reserve. I have a job where every day I learn something of significance, a work environment where everyone values the natural world and environmental concerns, and co-workers who love to share their knowledge of botany, biology and land management.

I've become an amateur naturalist, and in the last five years I've learned about native wildflowers, ecological restoration, tallgrass prairies and wetlands. I lead spring wildflower walks and take the Reserve's special friends and donors out by flashlight on spring nights to watch thousands of spring peepers croaking their lungs out. It's a lot more fun than planning a board of trustees meeting, but it's important development work nonetheless. I am fortunate to have found a place that lets me make more of the position than what is on the job description.

Visitors often remark that I seem to have the most fun job: “You mean you get paid to do this?!” “Barely,” I respond, “but the ‘natural’ perks are terrific!”

Life is certainly full of surprises. I never dreamed that I wouldn't be a homeowner, but I also never imagined that I would live in a charming house on a 2,400-acre nature reserve with coyotes and wild turkeys as neighbors. I wouldn't have thought that I would have to count my pennies carefully before taking a trip, but my life is so enjoyable and satisfying that I don't have to go anywhere if it makes more sense to save money. I certainly didn't go to graduate school to be a receptionist in a visitors center, but I didn't go to grad school to battle my work environment, either.

Why did it take so long for me to leave the professional track that was not only making me miserable but was destroying my spirit? Why didn't I see that finding a lifestyle that would offer happiness and contentment was far more important than the uncertainty and embarrassment I feared would follow my resignation from the “career world”? In the end, I never felt a twinge of embarrassment, only relief, and my family and friends were thrilled for me. So much for my groundless fears.

I think I understand now why it is so difficult for us to make these huge jumps in our lives. When I was so distraught, I was paralyzed. I couldn't make decisions, see alternatives or even imagine that change was possible. It takes energy to make decisions, and all my creative energy had been sapped. I don't think the typical work environment encourages us to think outside the norm. No one, not even the mental health professionals, suggested that I stop driving myself and find a new life.

I guess that is why I made those comments on the form from Furman's Career Services Office. I want to shout from the rooftop, or in my case the treetop, that it's all right to change course in mid-stream. We must find our niche, even if it's a bit off-beat. After all, it's our lives we're talking about. 🍷